



December Issue

By Amy Landsman

It's Saturday Night and You Need a Sitter – Who You Gonna Call?

The clock is ticking for Carole Van Wagner of Timonium. Right now, four women she knows have 13- and 14-year-old daughters who will gladly babysit for Van Wagner's two children. But she knows that once those girls turn 16, their babysitting days are probably over.

“There's that small window of opportunity,” she notes. “Once they drive, they're off the list.”

Babysitters. Those lifesaving wonders of the world—the women (and a few guys) of all ages who lend a hand when you need someone else to watch your kids for a while. Some lucky families have nearby grandparents or aunts who are happy to sit. But, for others, finding reliable babysitting help is a constant struggle.

While girls are the frontline sitters for most families, many moms don't object to hiring a boy for the job.

“One time, the brother was home,” recalls Van Wagner, adding that she offered the boy \$10 an hour for five hours work, assuring him that the kids would probably sleep the whole time.

“He said, ‘What time do you need me?’” she laughs.

Starting the Sitter Search

How do you go about finding a good sitter? Many moms say networking is always a good start. Ask your friends if they know anyone. Ask the other parents at your child's preschool or child care center for recommendations. Sometimes, the teachers' aids at the preschool or child care center are happy to sit—or at least have friends whom they can recommend.

Karen Lopez of Timonium has four girls, ranging in age from 3 to 10. This smart lady planned ahead. She stayed in touch with potential sitters from her days of teaching middle school.

“I used to be a teacher, so I could pull from that population for a few years,” Lopez says. Responsible sitters tend to have friends who are responsible sitters. If your regular sitter can’t make it, ask if she has a friend who can.

Making New Connections

In terms of finding a sitter, we’re very lucky that central Maryland is home to so many colleges and universities. They are good resources for finding experienced babysitters. Just call the main number at one of the schools and ask the operator to direct you to the student job center.

Local high school guidance offices may also have suggestions.

Another idea is to double up. If you’re going out with friends whose kids are the same age as your kids, consider asking the sitter (perhaps with a friend’s help) to watch all the kids together.

“We’ve had as many as eight kids, and the sitter was fabulous,” says Lopez. Still can’t find someone? Here are more ideas:

- Ask around at your church or synagogue.
- Post a notice at your neighborhood pool or on the community board at your local supermarket or bookstore.
- Put an ad in your neighborhood newsletter or community newspaper. Solicit suggestions from your community online listserv if you have one. Some neighborhood newsletters even list local young people who are looking for babysitting work.
- Tell your hairdresser you need a sitter and ask him or her to pass the word.

Another option is to check out Sittercity, www.sittercity.com, an online resource for babysitters. Currently, Sittercity charges \$95.88 a year for services (with a monthly plan)—and here in greater Baltimore, there are listings for dozens of willing sitters.

“We have approximately 150,000 sitters nationwide. It really depends on where you’re living...some cities are more saturated than other cities,” says Bethany Sirt, a Sittercity spokesperson.

“[The sitters] are mostly women, but we are seeing an increase in male nannies. All of our sitters have to be 17 years old or older. They all need to post two references on their profile. The more information they have on their profile, the higher their rankings go... If

they have parent write-ups, that will post them higher; if they're certified, that will boost their ranking as well," Sirt explains.

Sittercity also has an advance search feature, so parents can zero in on valuable specifics such as sitters who work with children with special needs, sitters who can drive, sitters who are bilingual, or sitters who are willing to help with homework or do light housework or food preparation.

Another online resource is Craigslist, the free online classified service, www.craigslist.com. One Baltimore County mother of three got about a dozen responses to her Craigslist ad.

"I've had bad luck and I've had good luck," says the mom, Linda, who asked that her last name not be used. She has some basic safety advice for anyone using Craigslist or other Internet resources, too.

"When you use the Internet, you really do have to be careful," Linda warns, suggesting that parents use their cell phones, not their home phones, when taking calls.

Also, she says that, when meeting a prospective sitter for the first time, arrange to meet at a park or other local public area.

Linda learned her lesson after she had an alarming episode while interviewing a prospective sitter at her house. When she told the candidate that she did driving and background checks on her sitters, the woman revealed that she had a criminal history. (See the sidebar for information for doing a background check on a prospective babysitter.)

Even though she has advertised on the Internet, Linda agrees that nothing beats connections.

"Word of mouth," she says. "The best way is to get a nanny from another family whose kids [have gotten] older or who is moving. My first recommendation is to tell all your friends with nannies to ask their nannies. Ask everybody."

Other Necessary Logistics

Some sitters have their own transportation, which is terrific. But many are either too young to drive or don't have a car.

Should you call a cab for the sitter? While I would not send a high schooler home in a cab, I used to call cabs (in the daytime only) for a couple of college students who sat for me. And I paid for the cabs.

If it's late at night, how will your sitter get home? With couples, one parent usually stays with the kids, while the other runs the sitter home.

But, what if it's only you? You can't leave the children home alone. And waking them up and putting them in the car so you can take the sitter home is an admitted pain in the neck. I found myself in that situation once or twice, and, honestly I have to say I just gave up on going out at night unless my husband was around to help.

And what do you pay a babysitter? My informal survey in Baltimore County found the going rate is currently \$8 to \$10 an hour. Of course, this varies according to how many children you have. One mother of three I know pays \$12 an hour.

In addition to the pay and the chance to spend an evening with your delightful children, there's one other lure you could use to entice a teen to come over and babysit.

"It's all about the food," says Linda. "You've got to have junk food. I always have a supply for any sitter."

What to Ask When Hiring a Sitter

Remember that hiring a sitter is a two-way street. You have to feel confident in her or him, and she or he must feel comfortable being in charge of your kids.

By all means, meet the sitter beforehand. And ask for references.

Also ask: Has she taken a babysitter training course? Does she know what to do in an emergency? Does she understand that chatting on her cell phone while watching your kids is not okay? Does she know that what she likes on YouTube may not be appropriate for little kids?

If possible, ask your prospective sitter to spend an hour or two watching your kids (paid, of course) while you are home to see how everyone gets along.

If she's a teen, you might want to talk to her parents. On the flip side, her parents may want to meet you before allowing their daughter to sit. Of course, let them. The more openness on both sides, the better.

If you are thinking about hiring an older sitter whom you are not familiar with and you would like to do a background check, visit the website www.mdcourts.gov/casesearch. Here, you can research District Court traffic, criminal, and civil cases, as well as Maryland Circuit Court criminal and civil cases. This information is in the public record.